DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 624 HE 031 879

TITLE	The Board's Role in Accreditation. Strategic Decisions. Board Basics.
INSTITUTION	Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	16p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, One Dupont Circle, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036; Tel: 202-296-8400; Tel: 800-356-6317 (Toll-Free); Fax: 202-223-7053; Web site: http://www.agb.org (members: $5.95 single copy; 10 or more, $3.95 each; nonmembers: $9.95 single copy; 10 or more, $7.95 each).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Accreditation (Institutions); *Accrediting Agencies; Administrator Role; *Governance; *Governing Boards; Higher Education; *Institutional Evaluation; *Self Evaluation (Groups); Trustees

ABSTRACT

This booklet for members of college and university governing boards focuses on the process of voluntary accreditation and provides trustees with information needed to ensure institutional autonomy and integrity. Accreditation is defined as involving both institutional accreditation, conducted by eight regional and eight national associations, and specialized or programmatic accreditation, conducted by about 50 national professional organizations. Briefly noted are the history and possible future of accreditation. Recommendations for general accreditation involvement include the following: (1) board members should be informed of the history, current practice, and strengths and weaknesses of relevant accrediting associations; (2) the board should participate actively in accreditation self-study activities; (3) the board should be informed of the objectives and activities of the visiting accreditation team; (4) the board or its representatives should meet with the visiting accreditation team; and (5) the board should review the final report of the accrediting team and evaluate its findings. Recommendations for board participation in specialized/professional accreditation include the following: first, trustees should be familiar with the purpose and general requirements of the specialized accrediting organizations; second, boards should be informed of highlights of the findings of specialized accrediting organizations; and, third, board members should participate in the periodic review of specialized accreditation practices. (DB)

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ED 427 624

BOARD BASICS

STRATEGIC DECISIONS

THE BOARD'S ROLE IN ACCREDITATION

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ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

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The Board's Role in Accreditation

Unlike many countries that depend on a centralized ministry for quality control of their educational enterprise, the United States uses a nongovernmental, self-regulatory system of assessing the institutions that comprise its pluralistic system of postsecondary education. The ultimate responsibility for the integrity and autonomy of colleges and universities rests with the lay members of governing boards. Administrators and faculty members contribute to this effort by enforcing standards and reviewing educational effectiveness. The academic community also participates in the process of accreditation through voluntary associations of institutions and programs that seek to assess and enhance the quality of an institution or program and assure the public that education is operating in the public interest.

The intent of this document is to show how participation in the processes of voluntary accreditation can provide trustees an immediate and effective grasp of their critical task of overseeing institutional autonomy and integrity. Further, it points out that if trustees neglect this oversight, the future of American higher education and two of its unique and essential features—self-regulation and lay trusteeship—may be threatened. A fresh look at the purposes and procedures of accreditation can help colleges and universities maintain control of their own destinies and find a renewed sense of common purpose. Failure among governing boards to take seriously the importance of a strong and effective system of nongovernmental accreditation could weaken the higher education enterprise by encouraging governmental bodies to assume the responsibility for control and assessment.

What is accreditation, and how does it occur? Who does it, and what activity does it trigger on a campus? What is the board's role in the process? This booklet will answer these and other questions.

Voluntary accreditation comprises two major types of activity: institutional accrediting and specialized or programmatic accrediting. The first is carried out by the eight regional associations of colleges and schools and the eight national institutional accrediting bodies. The second type is carried out by approximately 50 national organizations concerned with professional study (law, medicine, and so forth) or with occupational or disciplinary programs, institutions, or units within institutions. Both groups are self-governing membership organizations.

An umbrella organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), was established in 1996 after a national referendum of degree-granting colleges and universities. CHEA certifies the legitimacy of accrediting organizations, coordinates and maintains communication among these groups, mediates disputes between institutions and accrediting organizations, and helps to strengthen the effectiveness of peer and self-assessment of colleges and universities. The ultimate goal of CHEA is to improve public accountability and academic quality through self-governance.

A History of Accreditation

Interest in institutional accrediting first grew because some students could not transfer academic credits between institutions. This triggered debate on academic standards and requirements among colleges and universities. In existence for less than a century, institutional accrediting has evolved through several stages, from the first quantitative measures of faculty training, faculty-student ratios, and volumes in the library to broader concerns about clarity of purpose, consistency of performance, and assessment of student learning and development (known as outcomes).

It once was true that after an institution was accredited there was little effort to review its performance. But that time is long past. Typical practice today is for institutions not only to be reviewed regularly but for accreditors to issue interim reports. What's more, accreditors increasingly are requiring some institutions or programs to issue special reports, depending on the nature of the problem. Despite these changes in practice, many still falsely assume that once an institution is accredited it must meet few or no additional demands.

IT ONCE WAS TRUE THAT AFTER AN INSTITUTION WAS ACCREDITED THERE WAS LITTLE EFFORT TO REVIEW ITS PERFORMANCE. BUT THAT TIME IS LONG PAST.

The function of the review process is not only to extend accreditation but to enhance the institution. Thus, it is an exercise in self-examination and in peer review, in which even the most distinguished institution may discover areas in which it may need to improve academic quality.

Where Accreditation Is Headed

It is important for governing boards to become better informed about and more involved in the self-assessment process. Institutions today confront various forces that threaten their self-determination and could weaken the system of voluntary accreditation. Competition among institutions has become intense. Public criticism of the cost and quality of higher education has mounted. Distance learning and the "virtual" university no longer are figments of imagination.

Concurrently, institutions must deal with increasingly active state legislatures, higher education departments, and other agencies of state government, as well as the continued involvement of the federal government. Legislatures are more aggressive in reviewing higher education programs and in shaping critical policy decisions in postsecondary education. Some link institutional performance with funding levels. In the midst of this expansion of governmental roles, criticism of voluntary accreditation has grown, especially from governmental sources. Some critics seem to believe peer review is acceptable only when negative assessments are reached. Confidentiality is viewed as connivance. Some view the protection of the public interest as an exclusively governmental function, beyond the reach of the private sector or a system of peer review otherwise accepted in such fields as medicine and law.

SOME CRITICS VIEW REGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS AS "OLD BOY'S CLUBS" WITH VESTED INTERESTS IN PRESERVING OUTMODED ROUTINES.

In the literature of accreditation, several thoughtful analyses clearly set forth the important differences in the functions of state government, federal government, and the voluntary associations. But the message for trustees is not a call to battle against state and federal government. Rather, trustees must comprehend the significance of voluntary accreditation and find ways to protect the public trust.

This is not to say that institutional accreditation is without its faults. Some critics view regional associations as "old boy's clubs" with vested interests in preserving outmoded routines. These critics say accreditation procedures are slow, cumbersome, and obstruct prompt action when needed; that standards of accreditation differ by region; and that reviews are scheduled too infrequently to yield sustained benefit. Critics also question the proliferation of specialized accreditation organizations that emphasize particular programs at the possible expense of the institution as a whole—and in fact may impinge on institutional independence. Trustees should study how these matters affect their institutions and discuss them with their chief executives.

Criticism aside, it is important for trustees to acknowledge (1) the importance of the accreditation process to every college and university and (2) the effect of accreditation on institutional vitality, integrity, and self-determination. Any intrusion by state or federal agencies ultimately threatens the future of nongovernmental accreditation and the role of trusteeship. The best safeguard against such intrusion is for governing boards to integrate the accreditation process with their central responsibilities of institutional planning and periodic evaluation.

Although institutional planning and periodic evaluation are not functions of individual board members, they are central to the corporate responsibility of boards. For trustees to give cursory attention to written or oral staff reports on such matters is to neglect the very essence of the higher education enterprise.

An important decision is this: How will the board and administration share the self-study, maintain high standards, reach for improvement, and safeguard the integrity of self-regulation—all of which underlie the accreditation process? The following recommendations guide board participation in institutional and specialized accreditation. They may prompt trustees and chief executives at institutions that have an insufficient level of board involvement to become more accountable in this self-regulatory activity.

Institutional leaders can adapt these recommendations to fit the needs, size, and complexity of their institution; the style and organization of its board; and the requirements of the individual accrediting organizations to which the institution belongs. Board members must depend on their presidents and chancellors to help them participate constructively in accreditation as stewards and policy makers rather than part-time administrators, meddlers, or academic specialists.

Recommendations for Board Participation In Institutional Accreditation

1. Board members should be informed of the history, current practice, and strengths and weaknesses of their accrediting associations and participate with administrators and faculty members in appropriate activities.

Like the colleges and universities they accredit, regional associations undergo self-study to improve their operations. Because colleges and universities are members of these associations, trustees, administrators, and faculty members should help evaluate and strengthen accrediting criteria and standards and assess the usefulness of the accreditation process.

Other than taking part in the institution's accreditation or reaccreditation process, serving on an accrediting team is an important way to participate. Trustees should encourage faculty and administrators to serve on the visiting accreditation teams for other institutions, and they should be willing to contribute time themselves as public members of teams or the commissions that govern the regionals if they are qualified to do so.

To prepare for such additional service to higher education, trustees should be aware of the activities of their institution's regional association. They can do so by reading the association's newsletters, reviewing policy documents, attending membership meetings, or asking the president or chancellor to keep the board apprised of regional accreditation activities. At the very least, a discussion of accreditation should be placed on the board agenda well in advance of the self-study process to make sure the board is aware of the objectives, scope, and cost of this activity, as well as its role in the process.

2. The board should participate actively in the self-study, which is a required part of the accreditation process.

The self-study is at the heart of the accreditation process. Boards should welcome this exercise as complementary to their responsibilities for approving institutional mission and goals, ensuring sound planning and financial management, and evaluating performance. Trustees should view the process as an integral part of institutional planning rather than simply as a means of complying with accrediting requirements.

In addition to assessing its own effectiveness as part of the self-study of the institution's governance, board members should be willing to take part in other aspects of the self-study as the chief executive may suggest. The final self-study report sent to the accreditation team may be too voluminous to send to each board member. The responsibility of reviewing the report should be delegated to a special board committee, or a detailed and specific summary of the findings could be shared with each trustee.

Trustees often serve as members of the institutional steering committee the board and chief executive typically organize to coordinate the self-study. Board members also may be asked to complete questionnaires administered by the steering committee, and board officers sometimes are invited to review drafts of the results of the self-study. Depending on the organization of the board, it may be useful to assign a standing committee (for example, academic affairs) or a specially appointed board committee to participate in the self-study. Trustees can also be helpful in identifying others who can contribute to this stage of the accreditation cycle, such as members of visiting committees and advisory councils.

The self-study process too often is viewed as a "sometime" activity. If the process instead becomes continuous, the periodic formal review will be more valuable and much less demanding. Even among the most prestigious institutions, internal evaluative reviews need to be strengthened.

3. The board should be informed of the objectives and activities of the visiting team.

Assuring institutional quality is a fundamental responsibility of a governing board, not a governmental entity. Consequently, boards should not treat accreditation teams that visit the campus as unwelcome groups of external examiners. The board can help the president set the stage to receive the team as a group of peers whose candor and objectivity will help the institution pursue its own goals of self-improvement, self-renewal, and rededication to high-quality programs and services.

To prevent misunderstanding and enhance cooperation, institutional leaders should plan orientation programs for campus constituencies to explore the function, nature, and value of accreditation. However, if negative perceptions stem from previous experiences or are based on dissatisfaction with the accreditation criteria, the board should be aware of these concerns and be prepared to consider recommendations to improve the situation.

4. The board or its representatives should meet with the visiting team.

In some instances, accrediting teams interview board officers or the members of the executive committee. In other cases, all board members are encouraged to meet with the visiting team to discuss board priorities, long-range planning, and other matters.

Accrediting teams that complete their campus visits without communicating directly with board members are likely to leave the institution with serious questions about board involvement in the governance process. How trustees interact with members of the visiting team should be a function of the requirements of the accrediting associations (some routinely schedule meetings with board members) and/or the wishes of the board and chief executive.

5. *The board should review the final report of the accrediting team and evaluate its findings. It then should ensure the recommendations it approves are implemented.*

The final report of the accrediting team may recommend significant institutional changes that have financial implications. Consequently, the board must understand the rationale for any changes in institutional organization or practices the visiting team deems necessary to meet the association's standards. Once the board considers the final report and discusses it with the chief executive, it should review carefully its role in the implementation of the recommendations, authorize and encourage the administration to implement approved recommendations, and ask the president to provide periodic progress reports to monitor progress.

The internal self-study and reports of visiting teams provide ready means for governing board review and reaction. The various reports are far too detailed for the board to review completely, but if summarized and presented properly, they can provide trustees with valuable insights. The information in these reports should be a natural medium of mutual interests and among the foremost concerns of faculty, administrators, and board members. Participating in this process commits trustees to pay close attention to the recommendations of accrediting organizations and to the reactions of faculty and administration.

Recommendations for Board Participation In Specialized and Professional Accreditation

As a review of specific programs within an institution, specialized accreditation requires a different kind of trustee participation from that recommended for institutional accreditation. Nevertheless, specialized accreditation affects such trustee concerns as academic standards and the financial and personnel costs of various specialized reviews. Trustees thus have a role for trustees in this self-regulatory activity as well. The president or chancellor should keep the board well informed of the policy implications of specialized accreditation activities.

1. Trustees should be familiar with the purpose and general requirements of the specialized accrediting organizations that conduct reviews at their institution, the schedule and general activities for each review, and their estimated direct and overhead costs.

A large or complex institution or system may participate in several specialized reviews. Consequently, it may be difficult to keep board members informed of the organizations that visit the campus, how often they come, what criteria they employ, and other logistical details. This need not be burdensome if the chief executive presents periodic summaries of progress to the board. If a board committee structure exists, it may be appropriate for the academic affairs committee to review these reports on behalf of the board and for the financial or executive committee to review the institution's financial obligation to the specialized accreditation activities.

At some institutions, the cost of specialized reviews is significant. In such cases, the board may be asked to approve whether specialized accrediting organizations will be invited to consider accreditation of new programs. Additionally, the board may wish to review the cost-benefit ratio of existing arrangements with specialized agencies. Boards also can ask specialized organizations to coordinate time schedules with other specialized and institutional accreditation agencies so the process does not become too onerous for the institution.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) seeks to enhance the usefulness of specialized and professional accreditation both to the institution and the public. In an effort to reduce the costs and duplication of gathering and reporting evidence, CHEA works with the accrediting organizations to organize team visits.

2. Boards should ask their chief executives to share with them highlights of the findings of the specialized accrediting organizations.

Although the board's degree of responsibility for approving academic program changes varies from institution to institution, the chief executive should provide the board with an overview of the findings of the specialized visiting team, the requirements of the agencies they represent, and the consequences for the institution.

Typically, individual trustees do not review the reports of the specialized organizations. Sometimes, board members who are professionals in the field that the specialized organization is reviewing can make valuable contributions when invited to participate in the self-study or the visit of the team. Regardless, the board's responsibility for approving the educational program should encompass periodic assessments of the results of specialized reviews.

3. Board members should participate with administrators, faculty members, and representatives of the specialized accrediting organizations in the periodic review of specialized accreditation practices.

Governing boards are in a good position to appraise the work of specialized accrediting organizations because they must make decisions that affect the welfare of the entire institution, not a specific discipline. The standards of specialized accrediting organizations can influence teaching-load requirements, budgets, types of advanced degrees required of the faculty, the length of programs, and other academic policies. The board and administration should measure such recommendations against the institution's mission and priorities and not use them as the sole basis for shaping an academic program.

Board members can help distinguish between recommendations that represent encroachment in institutional governance and those that encourage needed academic program improvement. Trustees can encourage specialized teams to relate their objectives regarding individual programs to institution's overall objectives.

On Multicampus Systems

Boards responsible for multicampus systems may shrink from any suggestion of involvement in accreditation activities because of the apparent magnitude of the ask. Certainly there is a special problem here. But multicampus boards and chief executives should consider possible approaches to this task without inviting complete overload.

For example, regular reports from the system staff can help keep central boards reasonably informed about major findings of accrediting teams. Many systems have advisory committees affiliated with various units within the system. These groups could be included in some part of the larger issues of assessment. Where such a suggestion is impractical, a special committee established by the board can examine various elements in accreditation reports and form some judgments about matters worthy of governing board attention.

While recognizing the variations in multicampus structure and board organization, the board must be involved in accreditation in ways suggested by these recommendations.

Resources

Michael F. Adams, "The Five Fallacies of Academic Life," in *Trusteeship*, September/October 1995.

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This publication is part of **Board Basics**, an AGB series devoted to strengthening the effectiveness of governing boards and trustees. Board Basics comprises several topic clusters—The Fundamentals, Financial Matters, Fund-Raising, Academic Affairs, Leadership, Strategic Decisions, and Effective Committees—each of which contains several booklets. Several assumptions underlie the series:

- Academic trusteeship grows increasingly ambiguous, and trustees need concise, accessible, and focused information to help them carry out their complex fiduciary and stewardship responsibilities.
- Basic principles of trusteeship remain constant across higher education, regardless of institutional type, size, and mission. The series highlights these general principles to provide trustees with a core of knowledge they can apply to their individual institutions.
- The series addresses the distinguishing characteristics of academic trusteeship, especially as it differs in scope, substance, and focus from corporate directorships and other board service.

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